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# Language and Ethnicity on the Korat Plateau

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## Language and Ethnicity on the Korat Plateau\*

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### 1.) Method of Study

The purpose of this paper is to use linguistic criteria as the base for identifying the ethnic groups on the Korat Plateau. The main reason for using linguistic criteria for collecting data and classifying the ethnic groups are 1) Language is normally a convenient, accessible, observable and objective symbol of group identification. The differences in the languages used by different groups of people in this area are generally quite obvious. It is therefore relatively easy for the people to answer the questionnaire about what language they and their neighbours speak in the home. 2) Language spoken in the home is generally a strong indicator of ethnic identification. If one has shifted the language spoken in the home, very often there is no tie to the former ethnicity. 3) Sometimes it is rather difficult to answer the question of which ethnic group one belongs to. It also is sometimes politically sensitive. 4) Even though language group and ethnic group are not identical, knowing about the languages involved can be a key to the understanding of ethnic groups.

The ethnolinguistic data presented here is based on The Ethnolinguistic Map of Thailand<sup>1</sup> research project conducted by Suwilai and others at Mahidol University. The main purposes of this research project are to:

- 1) develop a database for ethnic languages spoken in Thailand.  
The information will include the number of speakers and the geographical distribution of various languages across Thailand.
- 2) produce geographical maps showing the distribution of each individual language as well as languages (at different levels) within different geopolitical areas.
- 3) publish a manual describing each ethnic group and its language.

The Project's data was collected between 1992-1995. The method of study is to work with the data at the village level. There are altogether about 65,000 villages all over Thailand. The questionnaires were designed and sent out to key local personnel at the village level, such as village headmen, district or subdistrict officers, provincial cultural center personnel, local school teachers, health personnel, and development workers. The responses were then computerized. Field work for data rechecking was conducted at certain places and on certain ethnic groups by the researchers of this project and in cooperation with the linguist or specialist who works on each ethnic group.

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<sup>1</sup>This Ethnolinguistic Map project is funded by the Office of the National Culture Commission, Thailand.

This project uses computer technology in both the areas of data base management and cartography. The program CDS-ISIS developed by UNESCO has been used for language data base management. For representing data in map form, the language data was linked with the Ministry of Interior's village data base (which contains the geographic coordinates on the village level) for mapping at the provincial, district and subdistrict levels. It has been found that the matching at the provincial level can be done at 100%, at the district level 99.9%, at the subdistrict level 99%, and at the village level at 89-90%. However, a lot of time is being spent on the base map for the geopolitical boundaries of Thailand which is not available at the moment so that the distribution of the village data can be presented at the subdistrict level (final result). The GIS - SPAN software is used for representing the distribution of all the ethnic groups.

This ethnolinguistic map project represents the first step of investigation. It can be used as a resource for selecting locations for doing research in specific areas of interest, e.g. language contact, language change, and demographic studies. The data base is very flexible, therefore other information can be added to expand the maps potential for varied uses. If the data base is updated from time to time, it would display developmental trends in all of the reporting areas. As a general base for longitudinal studies, it will reveal trends toward language shift involving both the national language and minority languages. It would thus be a helpful tool for educational planning and language planning. It might also reveal historical patterns of migration as well as diffusion and change of dialects and language contact features.

The picture of ethnolinguistic groups is normally dynamic. However, as a starting point for our analysis, it is presented at one point in time. Since at the present time the languages of wider communication, such as those used for interethnic group, national and international communications and mass media, are very influential and the ethnic minorities are very much endangered, it is therefore the purpose of this ethnolinguistic map project to describe the present situation of ethnic languages in Thailand and to develop a language data base, and to map the geographical locations of languages. However, information from written and oral histories, stone inscriptions, ancient ruins or buildings, linguistic documents, etc. are also brought into consideration.

The knowledge of ethnolinguistic groups gained from this ethnolinguistic map of Thailand will build a strong appreciation for the diversity of ethnic groups within the country. At the same time, it will help to enhance the self-image and self-confidence of the minority group peoples by showing them basic facts regarding their own group, such as numbers of speakers, location of speakers, density of language population, description of its culture and language, etc.

## **2.) Languages and Ethnic groups on the Korat Plateau**

Southeast Asia is one of the most linguistically and ethnically diverse areas of the world. Peoples in this area speak a great number of languages belonging to five language families: Austro-Asiatic, Austronesian, Tai-Kadai, Sino-Tibetan, and Miao-Yao. Thailand, situated right at the heart of Southeast Asia, exemplifies well

Southeast Asian linguistic and ethnic diversity. In Thailand at least 60 languages belonging to these five language families are spoken<sup>2</sup>. These languages and speakers are distributed across various regions of Thailand.

## 2.1 Findings

The ethnolinguistic groups found on the Korat plateau belong to two language families, Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai. All over the country, there are about 21 Austroasiatic languages. They all belong to the Mon-Khmer subgroup. There are 24 Tai-Kadai languages. They all belong to the Tai subgroup.

Twenty languages are found spoken in this region. They are 1) 9 Mon-Khmer languages: Northern Khmer, Cambodian Khmer, So, Bru, So (Thavung), Kuy, Nyeu, Nyahkur, Vietnamese (see Appendix 1.1) and 2) 11 Tai languages: Thai Isan/Lao, Lao (PDR), Phuthai, Nyoh, Yooy, Kaloeng, Saek, Phuan, Thai Korat, Thai Loei (Lao Lom) and central Thai (see Appendix 1.2). Please note that in certain areas there are Khmer from Cambodia, Lao from Laos (PDR). There are also some Chinese speakers (belonging, of course, to the Sino-Tibetan language family), especially in the town areas. The distribution and number of speakers of each ethnolinguistic group in various provinces of Northeast Thailand are provided in charts 1 and 2 and maps 1 to 18.

The following list shows the number of provinces, districts, subdistricts and villages in which each language is spoken.

*Nyahkur* is spoken in 2 provinces, 3 districts, 4 subdistricts and 6 villages. 2,911  
*Northern Khmer* is spoken in 9 provinces, 84 districts, 309 subdistricts and 6 villages.  
*Kuy/Suay* is spoken in 12 provinces, 65 districts, 144 subdistricts and 1419 villages.  
*So* is spoken in 6 provinces, 18 districts, 16 subdistricts and 176 villages.  
*Bru* is spoken in 6 provinces, 6 subdistricts and 7 villages.  
*So (Thavung)* is spoken in 1 province, 1 district and 3 villages.  
*Vietnamese* is spoken in 8 provinces, 30 districts, 37 subdistricts and 98 villages.  
*Thai Isan/Lao* is spoken in 19 provinces, 272 districts, 2142 subdistricts and 23,021 villages.  
*Thai Loei (Lao Lom)* is spoken in 3 provinces, 15 districts, 89 subdistricts and 772 villages.  
*Saek* is spoken in 1 province, 2 districts, 2 subdistricts and 5 villages.  
*Kaloeng* is spoken in 6 provinces, 6 districts, 18 subdistricts and 175 villages.  
*Nyeu* is spoken in 4 provinces, 10 districts, 12 subdistricts and 97 villages.  
*Phuthai* is spoken in 10 provinces, 77 districts, 151 subdistricts and 1,396 villages.  
*Nyoh* is spoken in 10 provinces, 62 districts, 114 subdistricts and 1,102 villages.  
*Yooy* is spoken in 3 provinces, 12 districts, 13 subdistricts and 122 villages.  
*Phuan* is spoken in 4 provinces, 36 subdistricts and 257 villages.  
*Thai Korat* is spoken in 5 provinces, 83 districts, 185 subdistricts and 1,881 villages.  
*Thai Klang* is spoken as a second language in all 19 provinces of the Northeast.

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2. The charts showing the five language families and languages belonging to each language family found in Thailand is provided in Appendix 1.



*Cambodian Khmer* is spoken by small groups of refugees in various provinces in lower Northeast Thailand.

*Lao (PDR)* is spoken by small groups of refugees in various provinces.

From the charts and the list above we can see that at the present time on the Korat plateau Lao speakers are in the majority. There are more than 11 million speakers who make up 71% of the population in this area. However, there are also 19 other ethnolinguistic groups. There are more than 1.2 million Northern Khmer speakers on 8% of the population. There are smaller groups such as Thai Korat with more than 500,000 speakers or 3.3%, Phuthai with more than 400,000 speakers or 2.92%, Kuy/Suay 2.6% and Thai Loci 1.45%. Other groups, such as Yooy, Saek, Nycu, Nyahkur (Chaobon), Cambodian Khmer, Vietnamese, and So-Bru, spoken by population that are less than 1% of the total population of the areas. Most of the ethnolinguistic groups in this area have the history of migration mainly from the other bank of Mekhong river to this area. Only the Northern Khmer and some small Mon-Khmer groups such as the Nyahkur have been staying in this area for a long time and have no history of migration. It is noticeable that about 6% of the population in this area speak central Thai or Thai Klang due to the influence of the educational system and modern mass media.

It is a fact that language is naturally changing all the time. The change may be fast or slow and the direction of change is determined by the surrounding situation. On the Korat plateau language loss (language death), language shift and language change have been observed. So (Thavung), a Mon-Khmer (Vietic) language which migrated from Kam Muan in Laos to Thailand about 100 years ago and was just discovered a few years ago, is still spoken in a village (Nongwaeng) and two adjacent villages (Nongcaroen and Nongmuang) in Songdao district, Sakonnakorn province whereas in other villages in Kalasin and Udonthani the speakers have already lost their proficiency in So and speak Lao in their daily life instead. Even in the Nongwaeng village and the two adjacent villages, a situation of language shift and language change has been documented (Suwilai 1995, 1996). Many social factors and the negative attitude towards their own ethnic language are major causes in shifting from So (T) to Thai-Lao, a more prestigious language. As for the language change many people, especially the younger generation, relexified their ethnic language to the Lao-Ngoh language and at the same time rephonologized some aspects of their phonological system to the Thai-Lao system. That is, there is a change from the original M-K register system to a tonal system. However, the change is not yet completed. Two systems are therefore co-occurring at the present time. This phenomenon may happen to other languages as well, such as some of the So-Bru (Katuic) languages which are developing tones. Some of the Kuy/Suay villages have shifted their language to Lao or Khmer and are thus called Lao-Suay or Khmer-Suay. They relexified their language but still keep their own phonological system. They speak Lao or Khmer with Kuy accent (Preecha, 1988). This may also be a case of Kaloeng which some people believe to be originally a Mon-Khmer language. However, it is now linguistically a Tai language (subbranch of Lao). It might have once been a Mon-Khmer language that has already completed the relexification and rephonologization process to become a Lao language with its own accent.

## 2.2 Discussion

**2.2.1 Early Settlement.** It is generally believed that Austroasiatic language is the substratum of other languages in mainland Southeast Asia. At present there are about 150 Austroasiatic languages divided into thirteen subgroups (Diffloth 1980) found in a wide area all over mainland Southeast Asia. A number are in danger of extinction. In Thailand there are about 21 Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) languages. The Korat plateau was an area of ancient civilization. It may be possible that the original people on the Korat plateau were Mon-Khmer. They might have been the Khmer and some other Mon-Khmer groups. Nowadays on the Korat Plateau more than one million Khmer speakers are found in 10 provinces. Surin, Buriram and some parts of Srisaket is the core of the Khmer speaking area. This Khmer variety has been cut off from the Khmer of Cambodia. They are called /khme:r lɔ:/ or Northern Khmer. The Khmer spoken here is quite distinctive. It still keeps original Khmer characteristics such as final trill /r/ which has been totally lost in Cambodian Khmer pronunciation (Suwilai 1994). Apart from that, there is evidence of the long standing Khmer presence from the Khmer temples, buildings, ruins and stone inscriptions in this area. Even though nowadays Mon is not found spoken in this area at all, stone inscriptions in Mon have been found. It is believed that once Mon used to live in this area in the past (Christian Bauer, personal com.) Moreover, there are the Nyahkur/Chaobon who speak a language which is closely related to Mon. Its phonological system is very similar to the old Mon inscription (Diffloth 1980 and Theraphan, 1984). These people are believed to be the descendants of the ancient Mon.

However, the various Tai groups have had the history of migration from the other side of the Mekhong River to this area.

**2.2.2 Village names.** The village names often indicate their geographical features (high land, paddy field, swamp etc.), resources (iron, salt etc.), history (name of the village settlers, important events, function of the village), prominent local flora and fauna, ancient buildings (Khmer temple), and names of the ethnic groups (Lao, Suay, Vietnamese, etc.). In many areas words from the languages spoken by the ethnic groups who are living there are used as the village names. The study of village names in Muang district, Surin Province which is the Khmer core area in Thailand shows that 90% of them have a Khmer origin. At the same time in looking at the village names in Jompra district which is the Kuy-speaking area we observe that about 70% of the village names are in Kuy (Suwilai and Sukhumavadee 1984, Naraset 1996).

**2.2.3 Names of ethnolinguistic groups.** As in other regions, there are also certain problems about the names of the ethnolinguistic groups in this region. One ethnolinguistic group may be called by more than one name, such as 1. Kuy /Kuay/ Suay or 2. So/Kha/Kha Kaso/Bru. At the same time, one name may be used to call more than one group, e.g. So can refer to both the So (Katuic) or So (Vietic) which are two totally different languages. This is the problem of the ethnonym and autonym, the name the people call themselves, and the exonym or the name outsiders call an ethnolinguistic group. Kuy and Kuay are the ethnonym meaning "human being". They are the names for the two different varieties of this language, whereas Suay is an exonym referring to the group of people who sent the tribute to the capital. The So, Kha, or Kha Kaso are the exonym. The meaning is not so clear, but not respectable,

whereas Bru is an ethnonym meaning "human being". Very often some subgroups have accepted the name others call them, such as the So of Kusuman, (Sakonnakorn) and the So of Songdao (Sakonnakorn). These two groups are actually different. Kusumarn So linguistically belongs to the Katuic subbranch of MK, whereas Songdao So linguistically belongs to the Vietic subbranch of MK. The data collected in this ethnolinguistic map project includes all the names by which each group is called. However, only the name the native speakers use or accept others to call them and at the same time, the name generally known and accepted by surrounding people to call this particular group are considered for labelling the ethnic groups in this research.

**2.2.4 Bilingualism.** It is noticeable that in certain areas of the Korat plateau nowadays the people are switching their primary allegiance from one or other of the local ethnic languages of Korat plateau to central Thai. This phenomenon is becoming more and more widespread because of the influence from both formal education and the mass media. However, the majority of the people are bilingual or multilingual so that they can speak their ethnic language as well as central Thai, the national language, and/or Lao, a regional language. In the lower part of Northeast Thailand Northern Khmer is also used as a lingua franca.

**2.2.5 Extra-regional extension of ethnic groups.** The distribution of an ethnolinguistic groups on the Korat plateau is not normally limited only to the area in Northeast Thailand, but extends across the regional boundary, e.g., the Khmer, Kuy and Nyoh groups extend to the East, the Lao Isan extends to almost all regions in Thailand and the Khmer across the country (see map 19 to 21).

### **2.3 Language, ethnicity and regional development**

The Korat plateau or Northeast Thailand which is one of the dry areas of SEA is an area of economic underdevelopment and poverty. However, it is the area which is rich in cultural and historical assets and the home of diverse indigenous cultures and ethnic groups. To understand this area knowledge about the various ethnic groups who live here is essential. The understanding of the ethnic groups may involve various criteria such as language, religious beliefs, history, way of life, etc. At the same time the respect for differences in world views would build the self-esteem and self-confidence of these ethnic groups. These facts should form the basis for any community development programs in this area. Neither economic nor educational development programs will be effective without the real participation of the local people.

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



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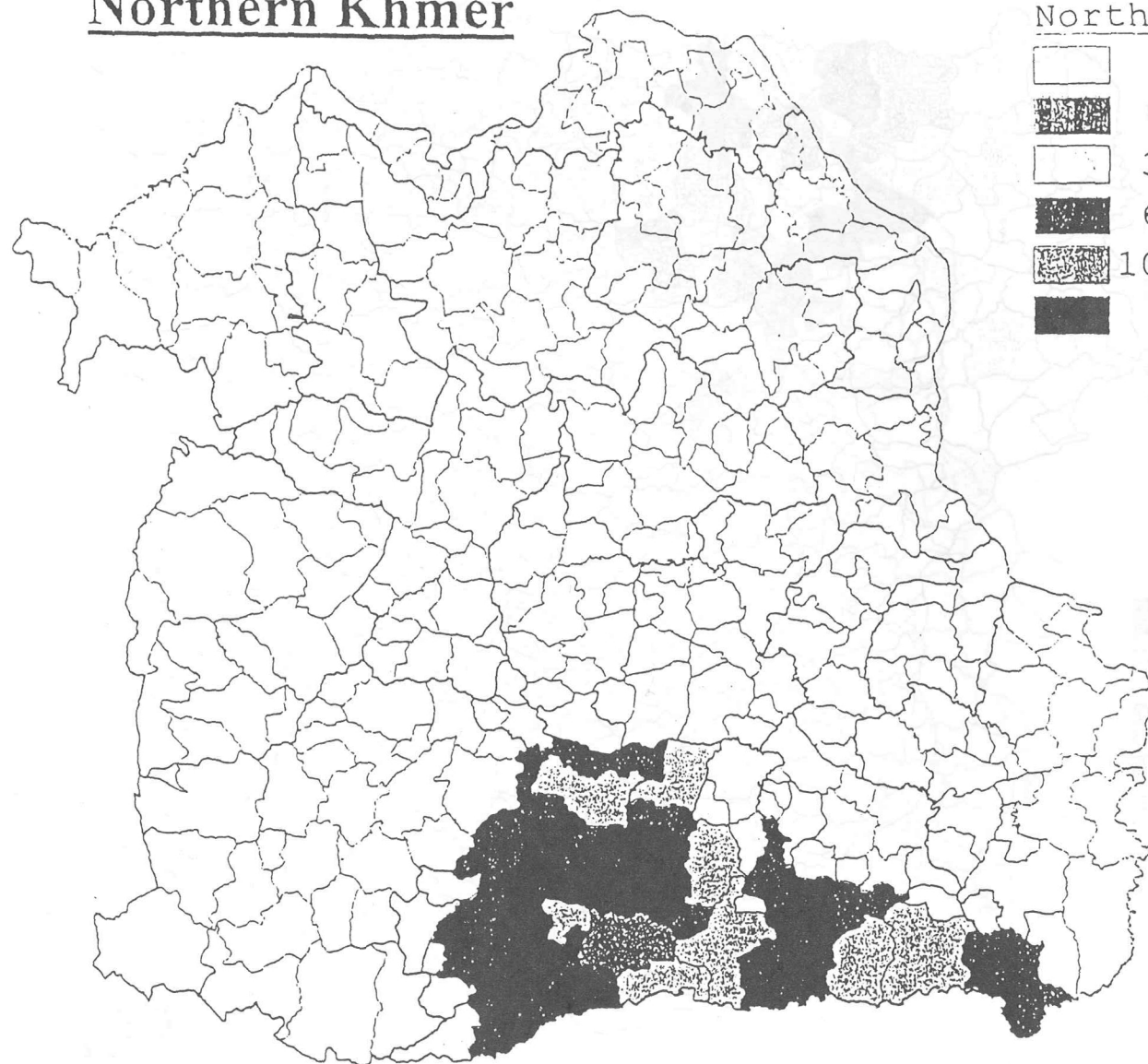
#### Abbreviations

MK	=	Mon-Khmer
MKS	=	Mon-Khmer Studies
JLC	=	Journal of Language and Culture
ILCRD	=	Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development

# Northern Khmer

## Northern Khmer

	50	-	5'000
	5'000	-	30'000
	30'000	-	65'000
	65'000	-	100'000
	100'000	-	140'000
	over	-	140'000

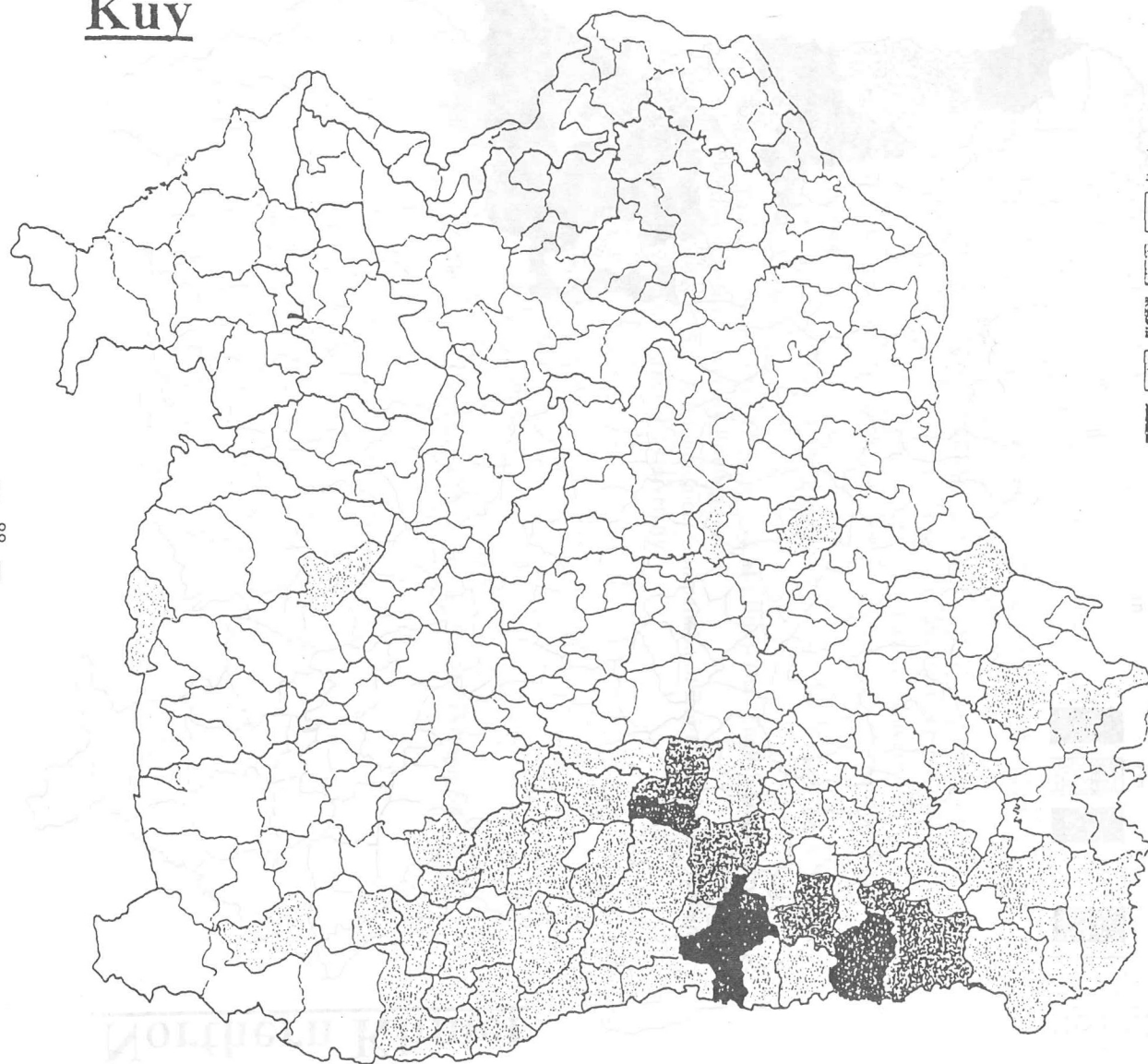


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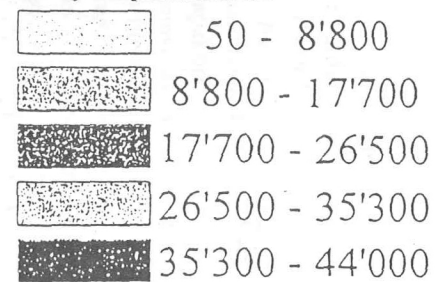
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# Kuy



## Kuy Speakers

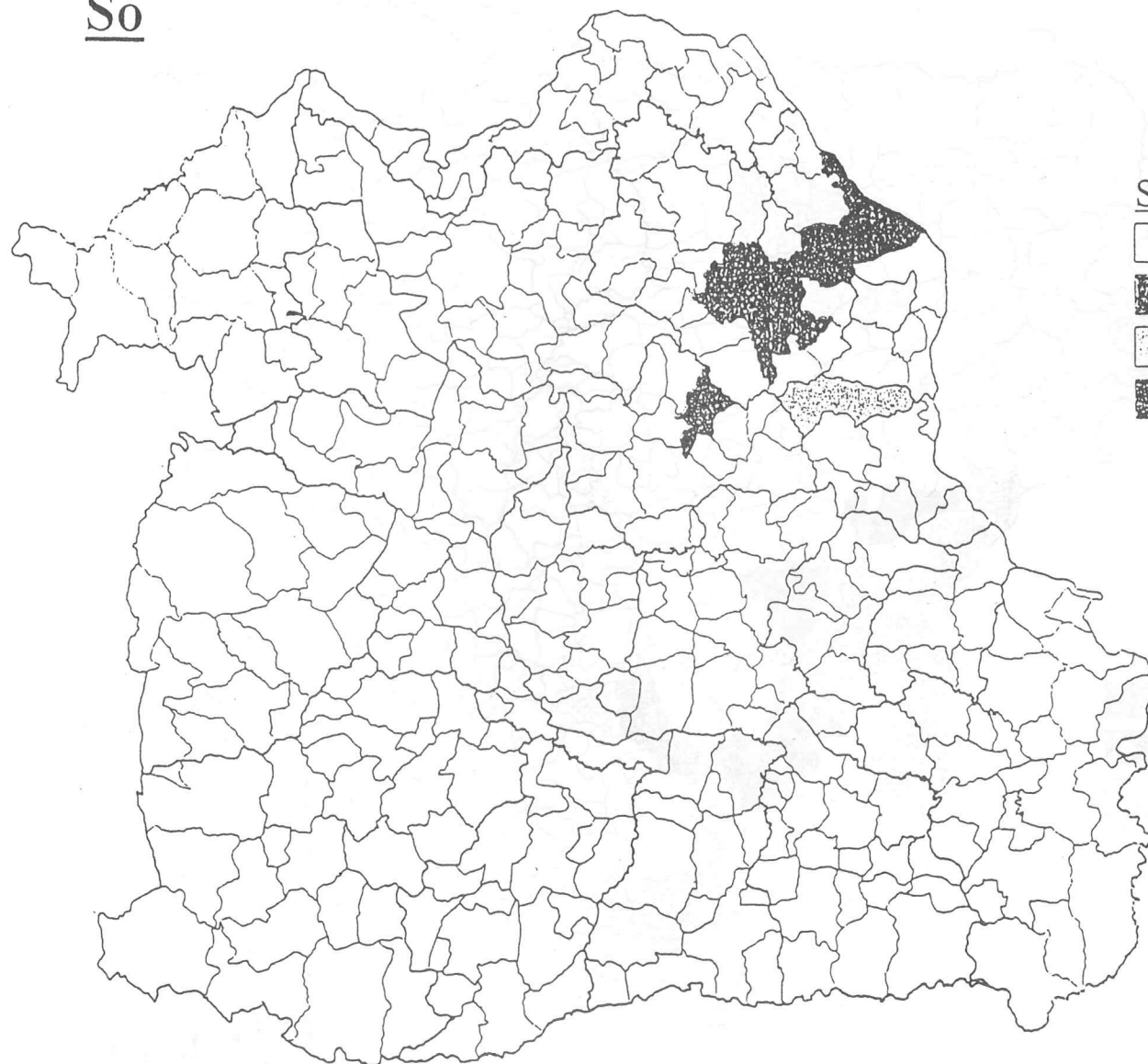


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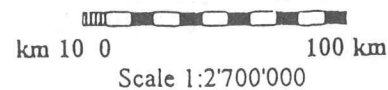
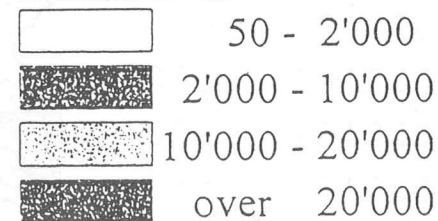
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So



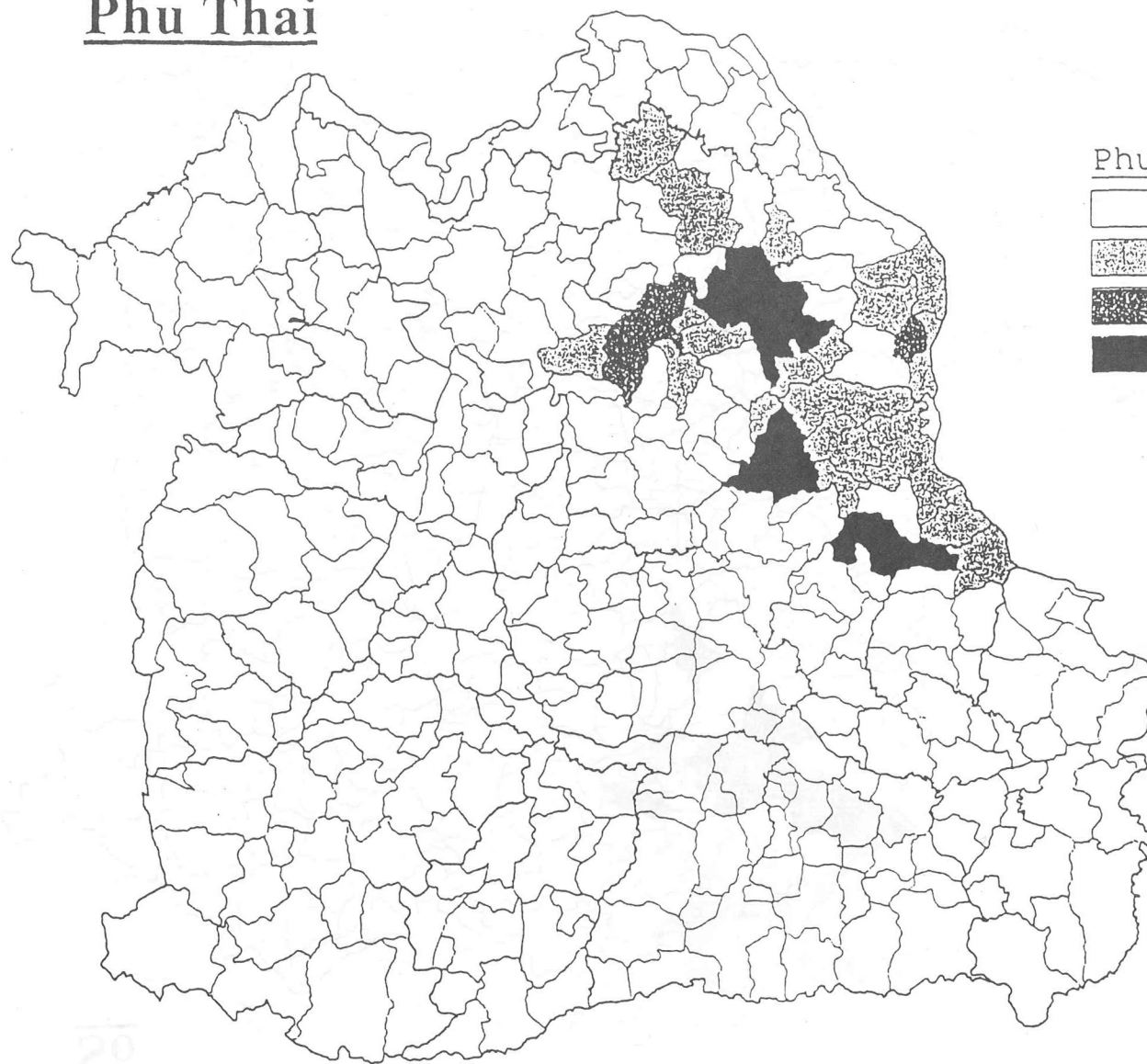
So Speakers







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# Phu Thai



## Phu Thai Speakers

	100 - 5'000
	5'000 - 15'000
	15'000 - 25'000
	over - 25'000

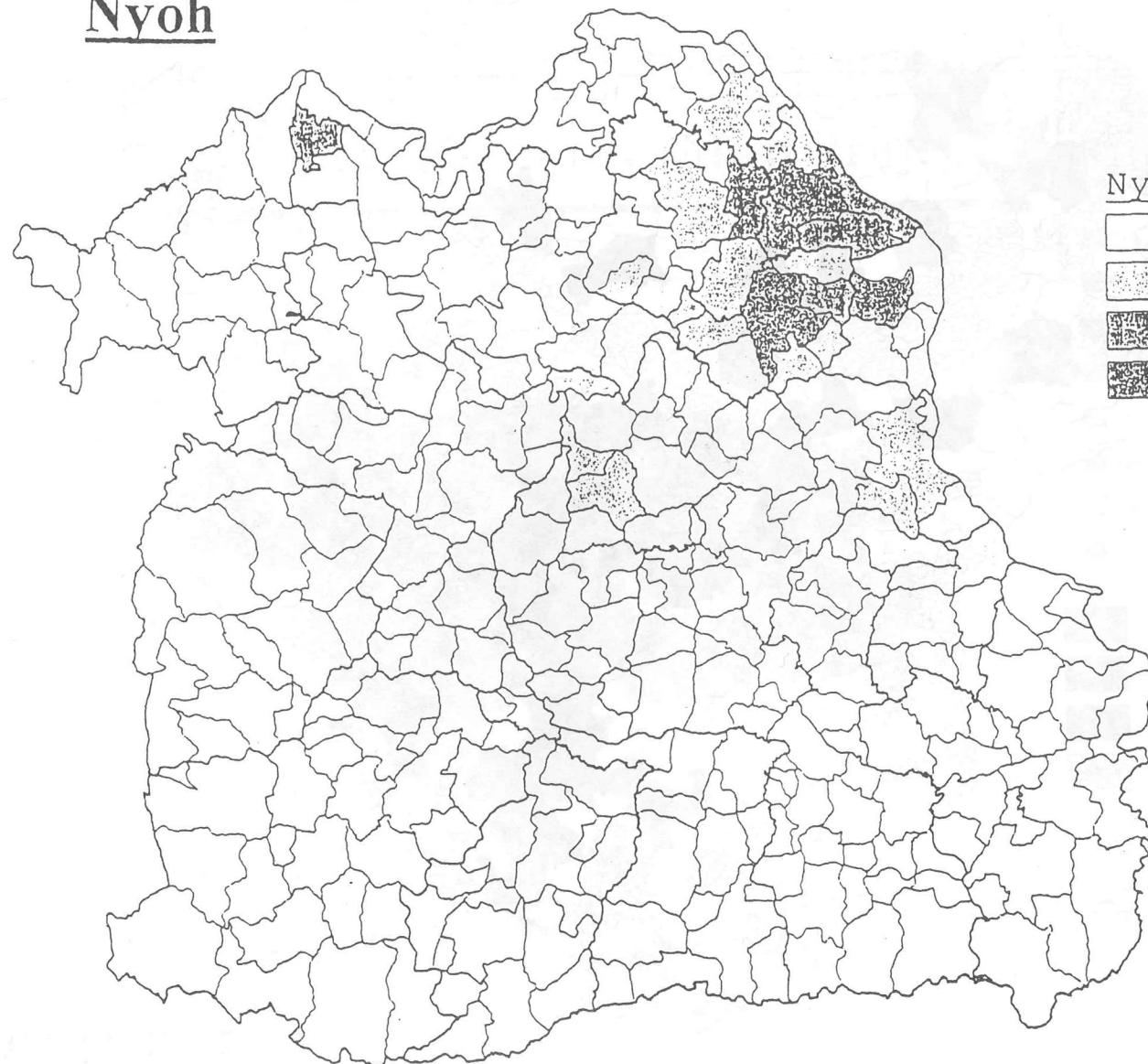


km 10 0 100 km





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# Nyoh



## Nyoh Speakers

	50 - 2'000
	2'000 - 15'000
	15'000 - 28'000
	over - 28'000

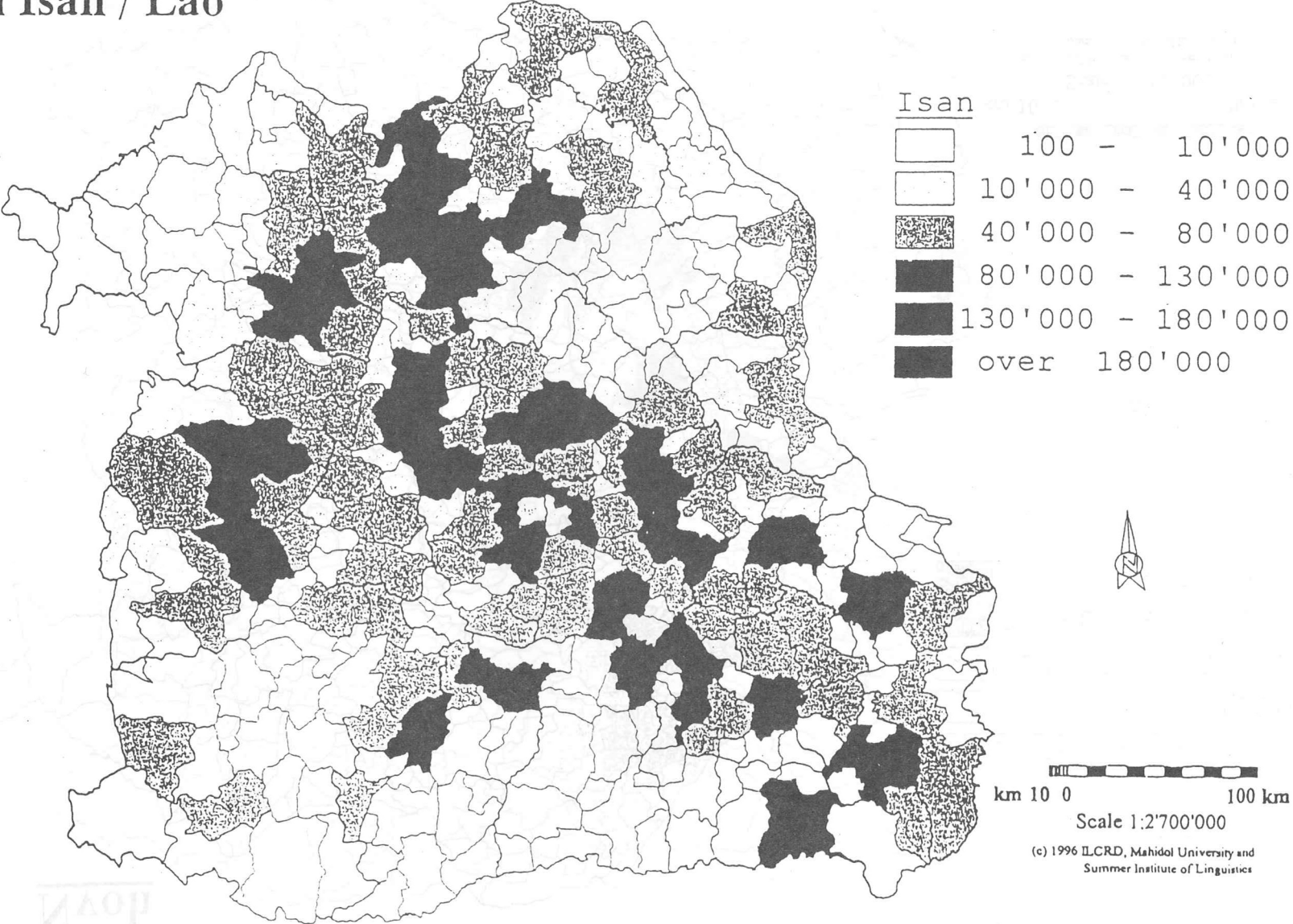


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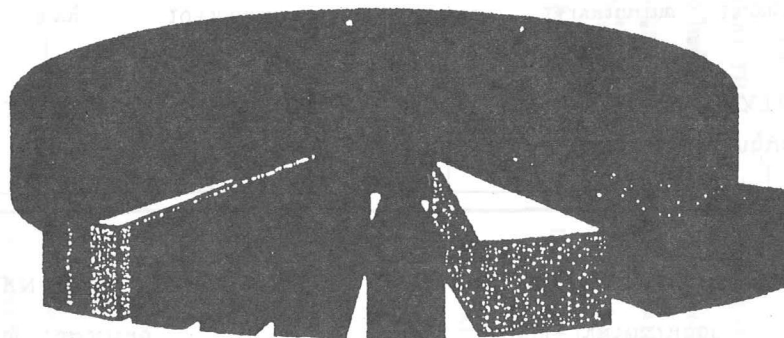
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# Thai Isan / Lao



# Mahidol Ethnolinguistic Map Project



■	Ne. Thai/Lao	11135493	= 71.1%
■	N. Khmer	1266767	= 8.08%
□	Thai Kiang	971120	= 6.2%
■	Thai Korat	521417	= 3.33%
■	Phuthai	457411	= 2.92%
■	Kuy	407724	= 2.6%
■	Nyoh	406738	= 2.6%
□	Thai Loei (Lao Lom)	226459	= 1.45%
■	So (Bru)	69967	= 0.45%
□	Kaloeng	68431	= 0.44%
■	Yooy	52579	= 0.34%
■	Phuan	23820	= 0.15%
■	Vietnamese	23539	= 0.15%
■	Nyeu	16511	= 0.11%
■	Nyahkur (Chaobon)	6283	= 0.04%
■	C. Khmer	6262	= 0.04%
■	Lao (PDR)	4500	= 0.03%
□	Saek	3535	= 0.02%
□	So (Thavueng)	1565	= 0.01%

Chart 2 Shows the number of speakers and percentage of each Ethnolinguistic group in Northeast Thailand

## 1.1ตระกูลออสโตรเอเชียติก

## AUSTROASIATIC

มอญ - เขมร

Mon - Khmer

มอญ - เขมรเหนือ

NORTHERN MON - KHMER

มอญ - เขมรตะวันออก

EASTERN MON - KHMER

มอญ - เขมรใต้

SOUTHERN MON - KHMER

กลุ่มปะหล่อง  
PALUANGIC

1.ละมัต  
LAMET  
2.ว้า  
WAIC  
3.ละเวือะ  
(ละว้า, ลัวะ)  
LAVUA  
4.ปะหล่อง-เรียง  
PALUANG-RIANG  
5.ปล้าง(ตามเต้า)  
PLANG

กลุ่มขมุ  
KHMUIC

6.ขมุ  
KHMU  
7.มัล/ปรัย  
(ลัวะ)  
MAL/TRAJ  
8.มลาบรี  
(ผิทองเหลือง)  
MLABRI  
9.ยุมบุรี  
YUMBRI

กลุ่มเวียดเมือง  
VIETIC

10.เวียดนาม  
VIETNAM  
11.โล้(ทะวืง)  
SO  
(THAVUENG)

กลุ่มเปี๊ยะ  
PEARIC

12.ชอง  
CHONG  
13.ซำเร  
SAMRE

กลุ่มเขมร  
KHMERIC

14.เขมรถิ่นไทย  
NORTHERN  
KHMER

กลุ่มกตุม  
KATUIC

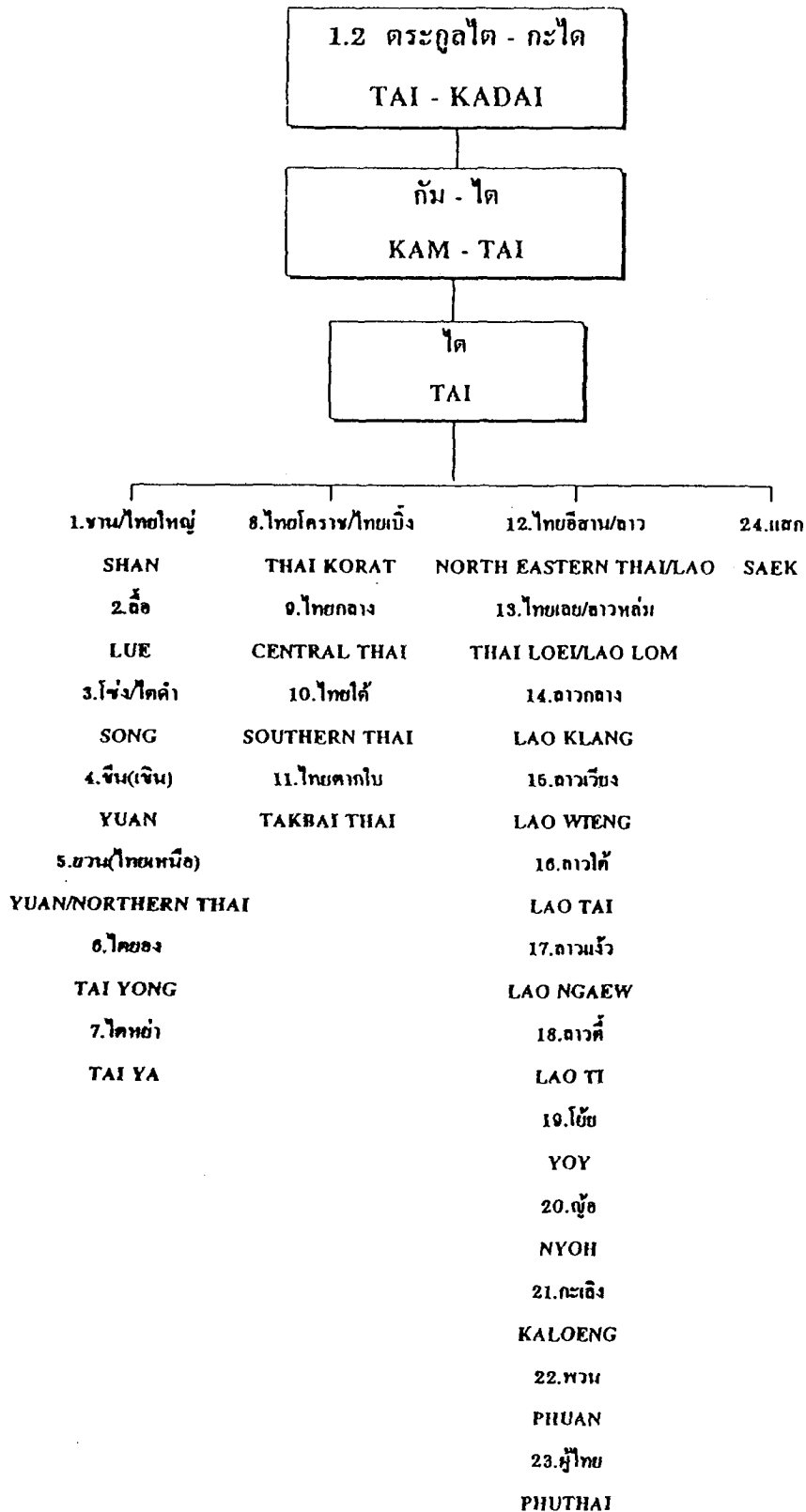
15.กูย(ฮ่วย)  
KUY/KUAY  
16.ญอ  
NYEU  
17.โล้(ข่า)  
SO  
18.บรู  
BRU

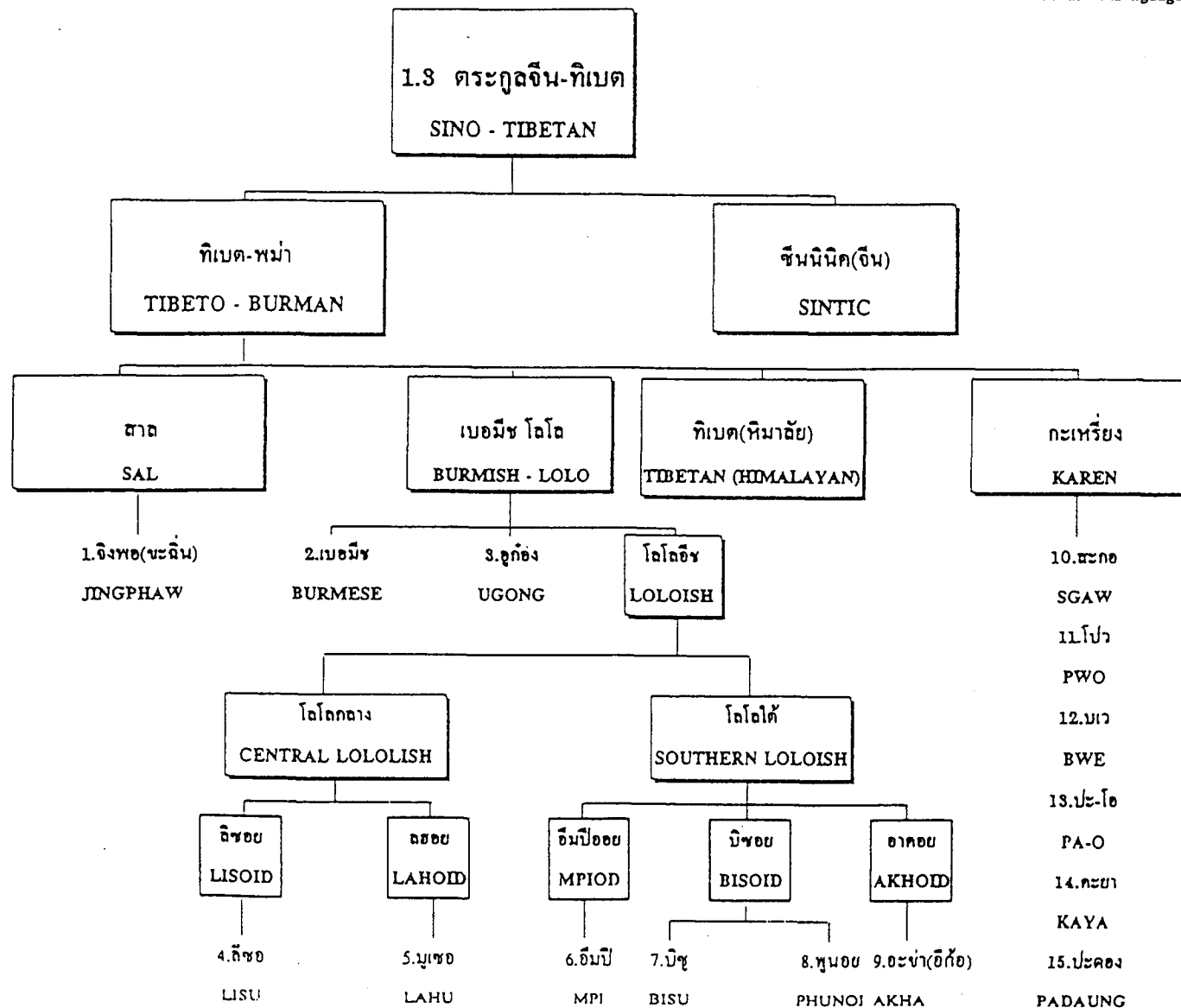
กลุ่มมอญ  
MONIC

19.มอญ  
MON  
20.ญ้อกูร  
NYAHKUR

กลุ่มอัสเลียน  
ASLIAN

21.เคนซัว/มานิก  
(เงาะ, ซาไก)  
KENSU/MANIQ  
(NEGRITO, SAKAI)





1.4 ตระกูลออสโตรนีเซียน

AUSTRONESIAN

1.มะลายู

MALAY/YAWI

2.อุรักละโวย

URAKLAWOY

3.มอเก็น

MOKEN

4.มอเกสัน

MOKLEN

1.5 ตระกูลม้ง - ย้า

MIAO - YAO

a.k.a HMONG - MIEN

1.ม้งขาว

WHITE MIAO

2.ม้งดำ

BLACK MIAO

3.ม้งลาย

STRIPED MIAO



